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Water Warriors Prepare for New Battle in Delta

Restoration plans revive Peripheral Canal fears

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In the water wars that have shaped California, few battles have been more divisive than the feud over building a 42-mile concrete ditch around the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Proposed by then-Governor Jerry Brown, a 1982 statewide ballot initiative to build the $1.3 billion Peripheral Canal was attacked by opponents in the north as a blatant water grab by the south. And the proposal was buried under an avalanche of votes in Northern California.

Since then, few politicians have had the temerity to utter the "P-word," let alone take up the cause.

Now, with understandable trepidation, a consortium of federal and state policymakers is reviving the idea as one of three options for solving the tangled web of problems that plague the state's water hub.

► INSIDE: Map of the three plans. A4

Many of them worry that, given the history of the scheme, it could open up a new round of water warfare, and an opportunity to map California's long-term future on water would be lost.

"Fears don't die easily on this," said Randy Kanouse, a lobbyist for the East Bay Municipal Utility District. "There's a growing recognition that if we don't convince the public that this is not the Peripheral Canal of 1982, we're in deep trouble."

New details of all three proposals will be unveiled today at a Sacramento news conference by the leaders of the seven-agency team known as CalFed. State Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler and U.S. Deputy Secretary of the Interior John Garamendi will also be there.

CalFed officials argue that the proposal for a delta canal differs vastly from the one placed on the ballot in 1982. The new canal would carry only half the water, and many

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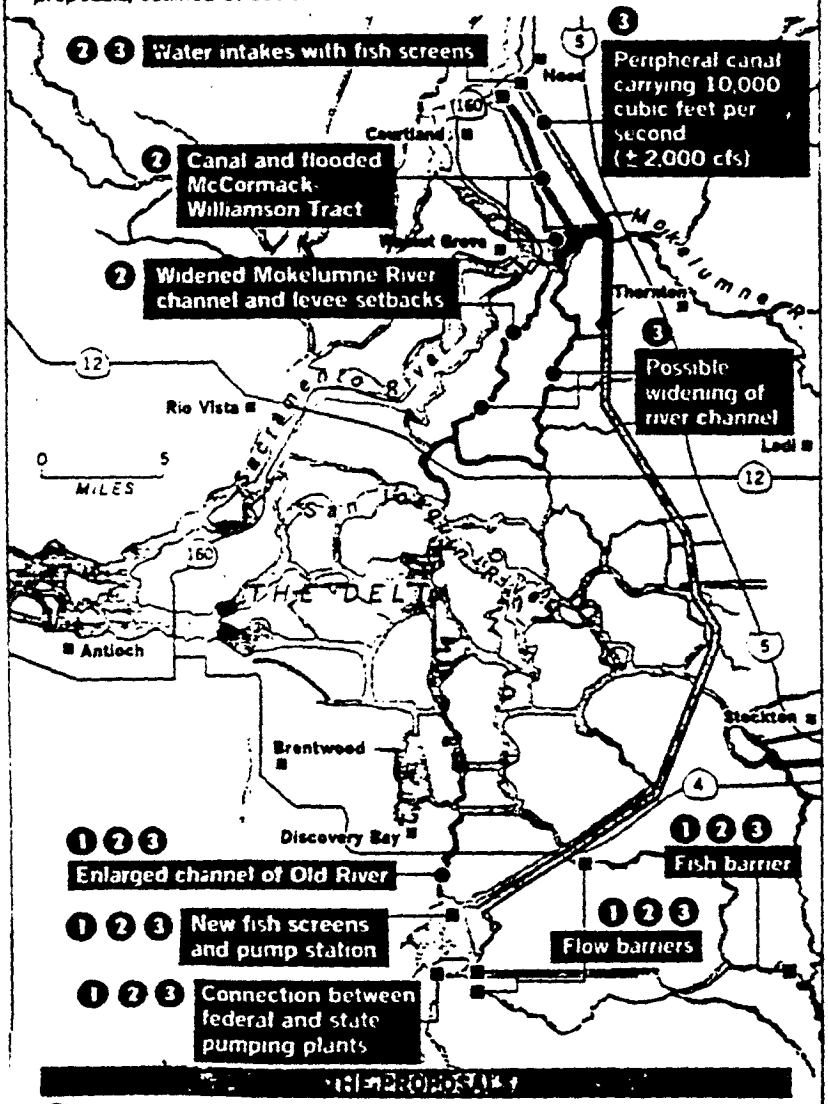
FIXING THE DELTA

A report released today outlines the advantages and disadvantages of three schemes for fixing the plumbing of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a 1,000-square-mile maze of sloughs and islands east of San Francisco Bay. The goal is to improve conditions for fish and wildlife, while ensuring a reliable and safe water supply for 22 million Californians and the state's $24 billion agricultural industry. The numbers on the map correspond to the three proposals, outlined at bottom.



1 *Would make only minor changes in the delta's plumbing.*

2 *Would widen delta channels and flood the McCormack-Williamson Tract.*

3 *Would construct a 44-mile peripheral canal from the Sacramento River around the delta to the federal and state pumps.*

All plans: *Would make the same changes at the southern end of the delta, as well as strengthen existing levees, improve water conservation, reduce pollution and restore the delta ecosystem.*

Source: Cal-Fed Bay-Delta program

Chronicle Graphic

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of the concerns that opponents had then are being addressed now in other ways.

This time around, the proposal is part of an unprecedented four-year effort to build consensus among the state's traditional water warriors.

In 1994, Governor Pete Wilson and the Clinton administration signed the historic Bay-Delta accord. For the first time, urban, environmental and farm interests agreed to work together and avoid the legal and political battles that had marked the previous decades.

The goal of the effort is to restore the ecology of the delta — the largest estuary on the West Coast — while providing clean drinking water for 22 million Californians and irrigation water for much of the state's $24 billion agriculture industry.

A vast network of sloughs and islands formed by the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, the delta once teemed with salmon and other fish. In fall and winter, its skies were dark with migrating waterfowl.

But as farmers diked and drained its wetlands and as cities in Southern California began drawing off water to fuel growth, the delta began to decline. Many of its fish are now considered endangered.

Similarities in Plans

All three plans for reviving the delta include $1 billion in state and federal funds to restore the battered delta ecosystem and Central Valley river habitat. It is the largest ecosystem restoration effort ever undertaken in the United States.

Other common elements include shoring up delta levees, reducing pollution from mine drainage and farm runoff, encouraging greater water use efficiency, and creating a market for water transfers.

CalFed officials agree that these measures are necessary, regardless of what else is done in the delta.

But those measures are not

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enough then dry. The delta is the major bottleneck in the state's water system. To get river water from the north to the mammoth pumps that send it south, it must squeeze through the delta's twisted channels, and they can carry only so much.

As a result, a reworking of the delta's plumbing is also required. What differentiates the three schemes is how much re-engineering would be required.

The most elaborate proposal calls for a 44-mile canal around the delta's eastern flank, which officials have dubbed the "isolated facility." It would channel water from the Sacramento River directly to massive pumps near Tracy, to be sent south.

The simplest alternative would make only minor changes in delta plumbing and put in new barriers to reduce entrapment of fish.

The middle option would build a short canal and widen river channels to speed water through the delta.

CalFed officials have avoided picking a favorite, in part out of fear of unraveling the already fraying coalition of environmentalists, farmers and urban water agencies. Instead, their 12-volume environmental impact report to be issued today lays out the strengths and weaknesses of each.

The public is being asked to comment on the alternatives by June. Then CalFed will pick one in late summer.

44-Mile Canal Proposed

In the report, CalFed engineers rank the canal as the best in terms of its ability to capture water during high flows, to avoid drawing fish into the delta and to assure a safer, more reliable supply for the two-thirds of the state's population that drinks delta water.

The option is the clear favorite of many powerful interests.

Urban water agencies favor it as a way to solve their water quality problem. As water moves through the delta, it mixes with saltwater and picks up organic matter, which combines with chlorine in water treatment plants, creating cancer-causing trihalomethanes.

A canal would greatly reduce the problem and eliminate the need for many urban water agencies to install expensive new treatment technologies to reduce trihalomethanes.

The canal also would have benefits to wildlife, biologists say. Equipped with the world's largest fish screen at its intake on the Sacramento River, the canal would make it easier for migrating fish to navigate parts of the delta where many now disappear into the pumps.

But environmentalists are skeptical. Instead, they see the canal as a return to the huge water development projects that put the delta's ecosystem in trouble in the first place.

"The sad thing is that we've spent tens of millions of dollars to come up with the same old solutions," said Tom Graff, senior attorney for the Environmental Defense Fund in Oakland. "It's no different in 1998 than it was in 1982."

Environmentalists say that with all the focus on engineering solutions, the emphasis on water conservation and marketing as a way to meet long-term water needs has been given short shrift.

Critics Step Up

Along with farm interests in the northern Sacramento Valley, they argue that CalFed has done little to come up with legal assurances that the canal would not be operated in ways that would harm wildlife and the interests of water users in the north.

"CalFed has made admirable progress in a lot of areas," said Rich Golb, executive director of the Northern California Water Association. "But one area that's lacking is legal guarantees about how the project would be administered."

Some farm interests have made it clear that they prefer a peripheral canal. But they have other concerns about the CalFed initiative, particularly whether they can recoup some of the water they have lost to environmental uses since the early 1990s.

CalFed Executive Director Lester Snow, a former San Diego water agency director, is struggling to keep the combatants at the negotiating table.

Snow said his biggest fear is that interest groups will galvanize around a single issue like the canal, which he says is only a small part of the complex effort to fix the delta's problems.

He says the canal is fundamentally different from what was proposed in the 1980s. First of all, its capacity would be between 8,000 and 12,000 cubic feet per second, half the 23,000 cubic feet per second of the original design.

Strains in Coalition

But the coalition has been showing signs of discord. An old battle over how to enforce a 1992 law that dedicates a portion of the Central Valley Project water to fish has erupted anew, leaving environmentalists and agribusiness angry at each other.

Another skirmish has flared up over Wilson's efforts to put a $1.3 billion water bond on the state ballot this November. Among other things, CalFed is supposed to determine how much in the way of new reservoirs and off-stream water storage the state needs.

But the governor's bond would include as much as $300 million for new storage, which environmentalists charge will predetermine CalFed's decision.

And finally, the state water quality control board has postponed decisions on how to divide responsibility among Sacramento River water diverters for improved water quality in the delta.

All of this raises questions about whether the effort can keep to its schedule of agreeing on one of the options by the end of the year.

Wilson is determined to do so before he leaves office, viewing his signature on an agreement as a key part of his legacy. But environmentalists say that may not leave them enough time to resolve the issues.

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